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ABSTRACT

Alluding to the difficulty in explaining the two opposing powers, the "dark side" and the Force, in the Star Wars movies, this paper focuses on the complex combination of negative and positive interactions among children who are best friends. Presented in question-answer format, the paper discusses research findings and needs related to two seldom explicitly asked questions. Question 1 concerns the definition of "the dark side of friendship," and focuses on fights, arguments, and annoying behaviors. This discussion explores the distinction between aggression and conflict, the impact of violations of assumed equality between friends, dominance versus leadership in friendship pairs, and violations of confidentiality or other violations of trust. The discussion maintains that additional research is needed regarding violations of trust, particularly using open-ended questions and direct observations of friends' interaction. Question 2 concerns the characteristics of friendships when the dark side is prominent, such as whether it is possible to have both positive and negative interactions on a frequent basis, the stability of such friendships, the role of popularity, and availability of other friends. Three additional questions are examined to illustrate the significance of research on negative interactions between friends: (1) what is the psychological and social profile of children whose friendships are high in negative interactions? (2) how does involvement in the dark side of friendship affect children's development? and (3) if children's friendships are high in negative interactions, should adults try to change those friendships? (Contains 17 references.) (KB)

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The Dark Side of Friendship:

Questions About Negative Interactions between Friends

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Paper presented in the symposium, Enmity, conflict, aggression, and victimization: Dark sides of dyadic relationships, chaired by Willard W. Hartup & Maurissa Abecassis, conducted at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Albuquerque, New Mexico, April 1999.

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"Long ago, in a galaxy far, far away . . ." is the opening phrase of the greatest epic movie of our time, a story of a galaxy ruled by a cruel and ruthless Emperor who controls an evil power called the "dark side." He is opposed by a small band of rebels, some of whom possess special abilities to control a positive power called the Force.

Even if you have watched all three of the Star Wars movies several times, you probably would have difficulty explaining these two opposing powers, the "dark side" and the Force. Your difficulty is similar, I believe, to the difficulty scholars and researchers have in explaining the complex combination of negative interactions and positive interactions among children who are best friends. Even so, trying to explain this complex combination can be extremely valuable, because an accurate explanation would also answer many important questions about the origins and effects of children's friendships.

Having borrowed part of the title of this talk from a science-fiction movie, I'd like to continue by borrowing the structure of the talk from computer technology. Today many software packages come with a list of Frequently Asked Questions, for which the usual acronym is FAQ, or FAQs. Each question is followed by a brief answer. The list of FAQs is intended to help people get quickly to the point where they can use the program for their own work. My talk is organized around a series of questions, too, but few researchers have asked these questions explicitly. Therefore, you can think of them as Seldom Asked Questions, or SAQs. After asking each question, I will discuss some research that leads to an answer. Next, I will either comment on a part of the question

that researchers still have not answered, or I will suggest how the answer to the question should guide further research on friendships. In particular, I hope my comments will encourage some of you to do research that will shed more light on the dark side of friendship.

SAQ #1. What is the Dark Side of Friendship?

I want to spend most of my time on this question, because it is the most basic and, I think, the most seldom asked. Three types of interactions can be viewed collectively as defining the dark side of friendship. The first includes fights, arguments, annoying behaviors, and other aversive interactions. These interactions are often classified together as conflicts. That label is unfortunate, because several scholars, including Carolyn Shantz and Bill Hartup (1992), have tried to give the term conflict a more precise meaning. In particular, Carolyn Shantz (1987) has defined conflicts as situations in which two or more individuals have incompatible behaviors or goals and they are in a state of resistance to each other's behaviors or goals. One virtue of this definition is that it distinguishes conflicts from aggression. Aggression may occur during conflicts, but not all aggression occurs during conflicts and not all conflicts involve aggression.

Unfortunately, many researchers who have studied children's friendships have not made this distinction, and I must admit to belonging among the guilty party. Some measures of friendship used in published research, including my own measures, often have a scale for conflicts between friends that includes items not referring to prototypical conflicts. For example, children and adolescents are often asked how often their friends "bug" them or tease them. These behaviors are negative in themselves; they don't involve a state of mutual resistance by individuals with incompatible behaviors or goals.

On the other hand, some items on scales for conflict between friends do refer to prototypical conflicts. For example, children and adolescents are asked how often they and their friends have trouble getting along with each other, and how often they and their friends have arguments with each other. Moreover, children's answers to these questions are often consistent with their answers to questions about teasing and other types of negative interactions. This consistency provides some justification for the conclusion that children and adolescents, when talking about their interactions with friends, do not distinguish between pure conflicts and other kinds of negative interactions that are caused by a friend's hostile or annoying behavior. Perhaps the failure to make this distinction reflects a natural human tendency to conclude that when you have trouble getting along with another person, it is because the other person is annoying or unreasonable. In short, it's the other guy's fault.

The second type of negative interactions that belongs on the dark side of friendship can be defined abstractly as including interactions that violate the assumption of equality between friends. Thousands of years ago, Aristotle argued that true friendship was positive only between equals. In our century, Piaget (1932/1965) argued that peer relationships are different from parent-child relationships because children assume that they are equal to their peers. Decades of research on sociometric status have confirmed that equality is not a characteristic of large peer groups. On the contrary, peer groups typically have a clear status hierarchy. But research on friendship has confirmed that children assume friends are equals, and challenges to that assumption may be strongly resisted. In particular, children may violate another expectation of friendship, that friends

will be helpful to one another, in an effort to preserve a state of equality between themselves and their friends (e.g., Berndt, Hawkins, & Hoyle, 1986).

The previous research also confirms, however, that equality is a social achievement in friendships, not an intrinsic characteristic. Children themselves can reject the assumption of equality between friends, and they do so in two major ways. First, they compete with their friends and try to prove they are better than the friends in sports, games, academics, or other arenas. When children are successful in these competitions, they sometimes brag about it, "show off," or flaunt their superiority to the friends. Such boasting obviously violates the norms of friendship, and so belongs on its dark side.

Second, children sometimes assert their dominance over their friends. They pressure the friends to do what they want, rather than deciding on activities cooperatively. They tell the friends to do things for them, so the help and assistance expected between friends is mostly unilateral rather than mutual. In addition, children sometimes criticize their friends in ways that show they consider themselves superior to the friends. Some colloquial phrases that refer to these types of negative interactions include "he tries to boss me around;" "she thinks she can always tell me what to do;" and "he's always putting me down." These phrases imply that the friendship is false at its core: The friends do not agree that they are equals. In Piaget's (1932/1965) terms, the mutual respect that should be the hallmark of all peer relationships is absent.

A third type of negative interactions between friends is more difficult to define specifically because it refers to a wide range of interactions that violate other expectations of friendship. Research during the past 20 years has shown that children and adolescents have many expectations about positive interactions between friends. As I just mentioned,

children expect friends to help each other. Children also expect friends to interact frequently with each other and to praise each other for doing well in sports or on tasks. Adolescents add the expectation that friends will share their most intimate thoughts and feelings with one another, and that they will keep confidential all this intimate information.

What happens when friends do not live up to these expectations? For example, what do children think when their friends don't help them or decline opportunities to interact with them? If these events occur when a friendship is new, or the breach of expectations is perceived as minor, children may simply assume that the friendship is not as good as they might have hoped. In other words, they may view the events as evidence about the positive side of their friendships. Not all friends are "best friends" and some best friendships are closer than others. Closer friendships entail greater expectations for help, social support, intimacy, and other positive interactions. In less close friendships expectations are lower.

But what if a friendship has been very close and expectations are violated? What if children were confident that the friend would help them or do something else with them, but the friend failed to do so? These violations and failures can be interpreted as serious breaches of trust. That is, children may feel that their trust in their friend has been betrayed. Betrayal is very different from a simple refusal to help or interact when invited to do so.

When adolescents talk about their friendships, the breach of trust that they mention most often occurs when they share personal information with a friend, in confidence, and the friend tells other people without their permission (Hestenes, Gruen, & Berndt, 1993). Such violations of confidentiality are serious because adolescents would not disclose

personal information to their friends unless they trusted that the friend would keep it secret.

Violations of confidentiality are not the only breaches of trust that concern children and adolescents. In a close friendship, a friend's refusal to help when one is in great need is also a breach of trust. Breaches of trust can also involve breaking promises, talking about friends to other people when the friends are not there (i.e., "talking behind their back"), and lying to friends about activities done with other peers (Hestenes et al., 1993).

Few researchers have paid much attention to this third type of negative interaction, although one measure of friendship quality includes a scale labeled, "conflict and betrayal" (Parker & Asher, 1993). I have already suggested why this type of interaction might have been largely ignored: Researchers probably assumed that measures of positive friendship features provide information about these negative interactions. For example, if a friend often refuses to help when asked, children should say that prosocial behavior by that friend is rare. In short, they should say that the friendship is lacking in positive features rather than being high in negative features.

Nevertheless, I would argue that a lack of positive friendship features should be distinguished from a high level of negative features. Stated differently, having low expectations for a friendship differs from having friends whose behavior is so inconsistent with expectations that they are judged as untrustworthy.

More attention to such violations of trust is necessary. To examine them, researchers probably should return to methods common in research on friendship a couple decades ago. Between 1975 and 1985, many researchers asked children open-ended questions about their ideas of friendship. The children's responses were used as a basis for

structured questionnaires that today are often used to assess the quality of specific friendships. Researchers can now choose from among several well-validated measures of this kind (e.g., Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Parker & Asher, 1993; see Furman, 1996).

However, children's ratings in response to questions such as "How often does your friend annoy or bug you?" are not going to shed much light on the nature, patterning, or consequences of negative interactions among friends. A rating on a response scale simply provides too little information. Open-ended interviews with in-depth probing of children's answers would be much more illuminating.

Another method that could clarify the dark side of friendship would be direct observations of friends' interactions, but conducting these observations would require considerable ingenuity. One issue is that observations in structured laboratory settings may provide more information about how children adapt to that unfamiliar setting than how they interact in natural settings. Systematic observations can be done in natural settings--Steve Asher (Asher & Gabriel, 1993) and Debra Pepler (Pepler & Craig, 1995) have written about techniques that make these observations possible--but even those techniques have limitations.

The most fundamental problem is that the meaning of an interaction is not always obvious to an outside observer. I interviewed one eighth- grade boy several years ago and asked him questions about his interactions with a long-standing best friend. In response to a question about negative interactions with the friend, he talked about the friend's teasing him, and commented, "he says it [each teasing comment] as a joke, but you don't take it as a joke." Other researchers have noted that joking and aggressive teasing is difficult to

distinguish (Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). Another distinction that may be difficult to make is that between leadership (i.e., having good ideas about what to do with your friends) and dominance (i.e., forcing everyone to do what you want to do). To make these distinctions, getting information from insiders, the children or adolescents who are friends, is essential.

SAQ #2. When the dark side of friendships is prominent, what are friendships like?

Translated from Star Wars language, this question is about the other characteristics of friendships that include many negative interactions. Few studies have addressed this question, and their findings are somewhat surprising. Closer friends might be expected to have fewer negative interactions, but in the few studies that examined this hypothesis, the results were mixed. In one study (Berndt & Keefe, 1995), about 300 seventh and eighth graders reported on the positive and negative features of their very best, second best, and third best friendships. These students described their very best friendships as having fewer negative features than their other friendships. In another study (Berndt, Miller, & Murphy, in preparation), however, about 300 students from the fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade gave similar reports about their three closest friendships, but they did not describe their very best friendships as having fewer negative features than their second and third friendships. Additional research will be needed to clarify this issue.

A different way to address the same issue is to ask whether friendships higher in positive features are lower in negative features. This hypothesis is controversial. In the literature on various types of social relationships, it is easy to find comments, and some data, suggesting that relationships that have many positive characteristics may also be high

in negative interactions (e.g., Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995). This idea is captured by sayings such as, "We fight like cats and dogs, but we really love each other."

But do they really? The idea that people can frequently annoy each other, put each other down, boss each other around, and betray each other's trust while still having a supportive and intimate relationship is highly implausible. Moreover, the available data on friendship are much more consistent with the common-sense hypothesis that best friendships higher in positive interactions are lower in negative interactions. The magnitude of this negative correlation varies across studies from about .20 to about .40, but in most studies the correlation is significant (e.g., Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Berndt, Miller, & Murphy, in preparation; Rose & Asher, 1999).

A related issue is whether friendships higher in negative features are less stable, or more likely to break up. In this case the common-sense hypothesis is not supported by the available data. For example, in one study (Berndt & Keefe, 1995) seventh- and eighth-graders' reports on the conflict and rivalry in their friendships in the fall of a school year were unrelated to the stability of their friendships between the fall and the spring. In another study (Berndt, Hawkins, & Hoyle, 1986), fourth- and eighth-graders' ratings of conflicts and aggression in their friendships in the fall of a year were unrelated to the stability of their friendships between the fall and the spring.

Why wouldn't students' reports about negative interactions with friends be related to the stability of those friendships? One reason is that a low level of negative interactions may be accompanied by a low level of positive interactions. Two children may rarely annoy each other or have other types of negative interactions simply because they don't

have a close relationship and they don't spend much time with each other. These friendships are also not likely to be very stable.

Another reason is that changes in friendships have many causes. Regardless of the frequency of negative interactions, friendships may end because the friends are placed in different classes, choose different after-school activities, or move to different neighborhoods. Even harmonious friendships may not survive when opportunities for regular interactions are reduced.

Still another reason is that some children are likely to keep old friends, even ones who treat them badly, because they have few other choices. When I first began to interview children about their friendships, I talked with them about why they would break up with friends and what would make them want to make up with those friends. One elementary-school boy said he would break up with a friend if the friend threw rocks at him, but he would want to make up with that friend because he didn't have many friends and he wanted more.

Children who don't have many friends will often take--and keep--the friends they can get. If children are not popular in their peer group, they may have few choices of friends, but most children would rather have a friend with whom they can sit at lunch or play on the playground than have no friend at all. When choices are limited (and they always are limited to some extent), children will accept even friends who tease them or boss them around.

3. Other Questions about the Dark Side of Friendship.

Many more Seldom Asked Questions about the dark side of friendship exist, but the evidence needed to answer those questions is even more limited than that for the questions

I've already addressed. I would like to mention three questions briefly, however, because these questions illustrate the significance of research on negative interactions between friends.

First, what is the psychological and social profile of children whose friendships are high in negative interactions? Not surprisingly, these children tend to be disruptive in school, uninterested in classroom activities, and low in self-esteem (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Keefe & Berndt, 1996). They also have friends who are disruptive in school, uninterested in classroom activities, and high in antisocial behavior (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Dishion et al., 1995). In addition, children who were physically abused by their parents are likely to have more negative interactions with friends when playing fast-paced competitive games (Parker & Herrera, 1996). Apparently, the problems that these children have in their friendships are often coupled with problems in school and at home. Research is needed to see how much problems at home and in school contribute to problems in friendships.

Second, how does involvement in the dark side of friendship affect children's development? A few years ago, Keunho Keefe and I reported that negative interactions with friends lead to increases in negative interactions with peers and teachers (Berndt & Keefe, 1995). Moreover, this negative spillover from friendships to other relationships is accentuated when friendships are also high in positive features. This kind of spill-over casts doubt on theories that suggest close and supportive friendships always have positive influences on children's behavior and development. If those friendships are with peers high in disruptive or aggressive behavior, the results may be much more negative than positive. This possibility implies that researchers interested in the positive effects of friendships should always include measures of negative interactions when assessing friendships, and

the measures of positive and negative interactions should be kept distinct rather than used to form a single composite measure.

Finally, if children's friendships are high in negative interactions, should adults try to change those friendships? I suspect that most people would say yes, but the more difficult question is how. Recall that children may not want to end those friendships because they perceive themselves, perhaps correctly, as having few alternatives. Recall that those friendships may be high in negative interactions because the children were subject to abusive parenting, and they may still have harsh and negative parents. Recall that either the children, or their friends, or both may be responsible for the negative elements of their interactions. Thus, the right target for any intervention is not entirely obvious.

Still, we have to begin somewhere. I believe that the best approach to an answer would be to seek more detailed information about the dark side of friendships. For example, how much do children's reports about problems in their friendships reflect the usual annoyances and conflicts that arise in all social interactions? How much do these reports reflect episodes of rivalry, bossiness, dominance, and other threats to the equality that should exist between friends? How often and under what circumstances do children feel that a friend has violated their expectations about how friends should act, and so betrayed their trust?

When exploring these questions, researchers should obtain as much information as possible about the children's friendships. Researchers should assess how close children perceive these friendships to be, and what children perceive as their friendships' positive features. Researchers should assess whether the friendships remain close for some time, to determine why friendships high in negative interactions are no less stable than other

friendships. With these assessments completed, we will have a better understanding of the dark side of friendship, and a better idea about how to decrease both negative interactions among friends and the negative effects of these interactions on children's development.

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